

How to Start and Maintain an Oyster Garden

Step Seven: Harvest Time!

To eat or to donate?

With luck and a “Blue Thumb,” you should have oysters ready for harvest within 12 months (fall of the second year). Of course, like any form of gardening, you should expect some mortalities and will probably not be able to grow all of the seed you purchased to the peak, 2 ½ - 3 inch size. Oysters should be removed from the containment systems at this size so that any remaining, smaller oysters will have less competition for food.

Below are some considerations to guide you whether you choose to eat your oysters, donate them to a sanctuary reef, or simply release them to public waters. No matter what your choice, you can be proud of your accomplishment in raising your oysters and providing a small “cleaning” service to Virginia’s coastal waters and “housing” service to other small marine creatures needing places to feed, hide and “nest.”

Eating your oysters

For the gardener, the size at which you eat the oysters is up to you since regulations limiting harvest size for wild stocks do not pertain to cultured oysters in Virginia. Rapidly grown oysters tend to have thin shells and a high meat content, so that should make them easy to open and tasty.

Eating raw oysters (and other raw, molluscan shellfish) can cause illness or even death due to *Vibrio* and other bacteria. Unfortunately, the addition of hot sauce or alcohol does not kill *Vibrio*. However eating thoroughly cooked shellfish does not usually pose a health risk. Different kinds of *Vibrio* are found naturally in coastal waters and are not a result of pollution, and so may be found even in waters approved for oyster and clam harvesting. The risk of ingesting *Vibrio* is higher in the warm summer months.

One particular kind of *Vibrio* bacteria (*Vibrio vulnificus*), can cause serious illness or death for people considered high risk, including those with liver disease, diabetes, stomach disorders, cancer, or any illness or medical treatment which results in a compromised immune system.

Symptoms of illness from *Vibrio* include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pains, severe weakness, skin rashes, blisters, chills and high fever. Infection also can occur

when cuts, burns or sores are exposed to seawater containing *Vibrio* bacteria. If you get a cut or wound while in the water, clean the wound with soap and water or a disinfectant, such as hydrogen peroxide. If you see signs of infection (redness or swelling) or have any of the above symptoms after ingesting raw oysters, see your doctor. For more information on *Vibrio*, go to the Center for Disease Control Web site at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/vibriovulnificus_g.htm.

Donating your oysters

In some areas you can donate your oysters to sanctuary reefs where the oysters cannot be harvested and are left to serve as brood stock and provide habitat for other marine creatures. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation holds annual “Oyster Round-Ups” where you can donate your oysters at various locations throughout Virginia from mid-July through mid-September. CBF asks that you pre-register for the Round-Ups (see pages 20-21 for contact information).

Another option, if you have hard, sandy bottom nearby, is to place your large oysters on the bottom. Eventually you may be able to build an oyster reef. You could put your clean, empty shell on the bottom as well. Huge oyster reefs along many of Virginia’s shorelines used to provide protection from erosion by breaking the wave energy before it hit the shore. Unlike bulkheading to protect the shoreline from erosion, these reefs create a “living shoreline” where plants and animals can thrive. A living shoreline is of far greater ecological benefit than a bulkhead and under moderate to low wave energy conditions can provide the same protection from erosion.



Virginia CZM Program staff assisting the Chesapeake Bay Foundation in transplanting oysters to a Lynnhaven River sanctuary reef. The oysters were grown through the Foundation's oyster gardening program. Photo courtesy of the Virginia CZM Program.